



Online Dating: Survivor Privacy Risks & Strategies

Online dating has rapidly gained in popularity as a common way to connect to potential dates or find a partner. Dating sites range from major companies with millions of users from all walks of life, to niche sites that cater to specific communities based on interests or background. Some survivors who are wary of meeting in person, or prefer to be able to choose the identity they present to the world, may find more flexibility or comfort online.

Many people have concerns about the safety of online dating, often due to widely publicized stories of assault and abuse. For anyone considering online dating, especially survivors who may have heightened privacy risks, it's important to have information about privacy and safety options. Everyone should be able to be online safely, free from harassment and abuse, and that includes dating.

Privacy

Dating sites rely on gathering and selling information about users for marketing and to make a profit. This is important because the perception of anonymity online may not match the reality – private and intimate information about users is gathered and sold by most sites. In addition to the routine sharing of user data for marketing, dating sites have exposed users' personal information accidentally through bugs in their software, and through inadequate security, allowing hackers to access personal and financial information.

Harassment

Young adults, and particularly young women, experience online harassment at a high rate. People who identify with other marginalized groups are more likely to experience harassment. Online dating represents a small portion of where people say that online harassment happens.¹

¹ The Pew Center on the Internet and American Life [Online Harassment report](#) says that 1 in 4 women have been stalked online or were the target of online sexual harassment. About 6% of respondents said harassment occurred through online dating rather than the 66% who said it was through social media.

Harassment, threats, and abuse that happen “only” online should be taken seriously. Such experiences can be traumatizing, and may include financial crime or identity theft. Victims report efforts to ruin their reputations and drive them from online community. If enough identifying information is known, the abuse can also quickly become an offline threat.

Strategies to Increase Privacy and Safety

The most common concern with online dating is safety, especially as users move to meet up in real life. People often ask, “How do you know the other person is really who they say they are?” and “How can I protect myself?” Another concern with online dating, and dating in real life, is the non-consensual sharing of intimate images. Read more about [Images, Consent, and Abuse](#). While most sites offer tips to increase safety, most advice puts the responsibility on the potential victim.

There have been several dating services designed and marketed to increase feelings of safety and empowerment when dating online, particularly for women and LGBTQ people. One common approach is to limit potential matches to people who are friends of your friends (through Facebook or another social media platform). However, this approach is driven by the fear of attack by strangers, while, in fact, the majority of assaults and abuse are perpetrated by an acquaintance or someone known to the victim.

When using online dating services, you may want to consider some of these steps to increase your safety and privacy online.

Getting Started

1. When creating accounts and profiles, choose a username that doesn't include your real name or other identifying information. Protect your privacy by not giving out identifying or contact information.
2. Consider using different email addresses, profile pictures, and strong passwords for dating sites, and maybe even for each site you use. Keeping

this information separate from the rest of your life can help protect your privacy and safety.

3. Search for yourself online, or use privacy checking services to find out what information is available about you online.

Connecting Online with Potential Dates

1. Take as much time as you need to before sharing a lot of personal information, including pictures. Just because someone asks for your info doesn't mean you have to share. They should respect your boundaries. It's impossible to get information back once it's been shared.
2. Do an internet search about the person. Check out news articles, social media sites, and images. Remember that criminal background checks only turn up information if someone has been arrested and/or prosecuted.
3. Be careful about attachments and links, which might install spyware or other malware on your devices.
4. **Trust your instincts.** If you start to feel uncomfortable, it's always ok to cease contact.

Considering Meeting In Real Life (IRL)

1. Meet up instead of having them pick you up.
2. Bring your phone.
3. Let a friend know ahead of time where you are going, and that you will reach out to them when the date is over.
4. Leave an address and some information somewhere.
5. Familiarize yourself with the meet-up spot ahead of time. Only meet where you're comfortable.
6. Watch out for people saying they want to visit but need loans to be able to get to you, or who use other stories to gain your sympathy and then ask for money.
7. It's ok to schedule short dates, or to cut dates short if it's not going in a direction you are interested in (no matter how long you've been chatting).
Trust your instincts.

Evidence & Documentation

Survivors of online abuse, or violence in real life that began online, may choose to report their experiences to the dating platforms or to the legal system. Often a site's Terms of Service will state what kind of behavior is not allowed, and a survivor may ask to have someone removed based on that.

Because the technology uses both hardware like computers or smartphones, as well as Internet providers and the dating company's servers, digital evidence may be available. In addition, survivors may consider taking pictures, screenshots, or saving other relevant information. See our [tips on documenting abuse](#), and a [sample documentation log](#).

Online harassment and abuse may fall under a number of crimes, depending on what is happening. To learn more about laws in your state on online harassment, visit [WomensLaw.org](#).

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We have a variety of handouts describing the risks and potential benefits of online communities. We update our materials frequently. Please visit [TechSafety.org](#) for the latest version of this and other materials.